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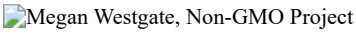
Inside the Non-GMO Project

11.10.2015
By Jeff Gelski


Megan Westgate, Non-GMO Project

Megan Westgate is the executive director of the Non-GMO Project.

Back in 2005 the Natural Grocery Co., based in Berkeley, Calif., and the Big Carrot Natural Food Market, based in Toronto, teamed up to form the Non-GMO Project. The two businesses shared a common goal of creating a standardized meaning of non-G.M.O. for the North American food industry. The Non-GMO Project was incorporated in 2007. Its impact on the food industry has surged over the past decade.

Products first were verified in 2010, reaching a total of 4,163 products that year. Since then, the number has grown to more than 34,000 verified products.

Milling & Baking News interviewed Megan Westgate, the executive director of the Non-GMO Project, about how companies may receive the Non-GMO Project Verification, what type of labeling they should avoid and what potential regulatory action may be ahead.

Milling & Baking News: For companies wanting to undergo the Non-GMO Project Verification process, how long is the waiting list?

Megan Westgate: There is no wait list. As consumer demand for Non-GMO Project Verified has increased, we have continued to add the number of technical administrators that are qualified to perform our verification program, which has greatly expanded our verification capacity. We will continue to bring on new technical administrators to ensure that we can meet the industry's desire for independent third-party verification.

MBN: How long does the Non-GMO Project Verification process take?

Megan Westgate: On average it takes four to six months for a product to achieve Non-GMO Project Verification. This timeframe varies depending on the in of each product, whether the products contain high-risk ingredients, and whether testing and facility inspections are required.

MBN: Can you explain the 0.9% action threshold?

Megan Westgate: Absence of all G.M.O.s is the target for all Non-GMO Project Standard compliant products. The 0.9% action threshold means that all human food, ingredients, supplements, personal care products and other products that are either ingested or used directly on skin must meet or fall below a testing threshold of 0.9% of the final product dry weight. This is in alignment with regulation by the European Union, where any product containing more than 0.9%

G.M.O. must be labeled.

MBN: Does the Non-GMO Project Verification process include all aspects of production, such as from farm to table?

Megan Westgate: The Standard requires ongoing testing of all major high-risk inputs. The testing must be conducted post-harvest, on a valid sample with testable DNA intact. Beyond that, there is some flexibility as to where the testing happens and how deep the supply chain engagement is. The Standard is a hybrid of process and testing. You don't necessarily have to go all the way back to the seed, because you can determine non-G.M.O. status with a test.

That said, there are a lot of efficiencies and benefits to having full engagement from the entire supply chain, and we are increasingly seeing participation from all types of companies. The activities covered by the Standard include agricultural production, handling, storage, distribution, processing, manufacturing and packaging.

MBN: Does the Non-GMO Project have an opinion about products on the market labeled as "G.M.O.-free"?

Megan Westgate: Unfortunately, "G.M.O.-free" claims are not legally or scientifically defensible. The risk of contamination to seeds, crops, ingredients and products is too high to reliably claim that a product is "G.M.O.-free." While there are a handful of unsubstantiated non-G.M.O. claims on the market, the Non-GMO Project Verified label is North America's only independent verification for products made according to best practices for G.M.O. avoidance. Our rigorous Standard for G.M.O. avoidance is based on ongoing testing of all major G.M.O. high-risk ingredients, and stringent traceability and segregation measures.

MBN: If a company already has a product that is certified organic under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program, why might the company also seek Non-GMO Project Verification for that product?

Megan Westgate: Consumers are increasingly looking for assurance that all major ingredients at high risk for G.M.O. contamination have been tested. While the regulations of the (National Organic Program) prohibit the use of G.M.O.s, only the Non-GMO Project takes the additional measure of requiring comprehensive ongoing testing. Therefore, many brands with organic products seek the Non-GMO Project Verified seal in addition to the organic label to demonstrate their commitment to the most rigorous G.M.O. avoidance measures possible.

MBN: Does the Non-GMO Project have an opinion on state laws, such as the one in Vermont, for the mandatory labeling of products containing G.M.O.s? Does the Non-GMO Project have an opinion on any potential national federal laws on the voluntary labeling of non-G.M.O. products/ingredients? An example would be the Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act of 2015 (H.R. 1599) that the U.S. House of Representatives passed this year.

Megan Westgate: The Non-GMO Project supports campaigns to bring transparency at both the state and federal levels. We support policy change that will help protect the food supply in the future, as well as provide consumers more informed choice. Vermont's mandatory labeling law does this. The federally proposed H.R. 1599 does not.

In the meantime, we're maintaining a diligent focus on providing immediate consumer choice in the form of Non-GMO Project Verified labels for the products that have been approved through our third-party program.

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